

City of Detroit

CITY COUNCIL

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TO: The Honorable City Council

FROM: David Whitaker
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DATE: June 15, 2006

RE: **HISTORY OF THE GUARDIAN ANGELS**

At the Honorable City Council's request, the Research & Analysis Division (RAD) has researched the history of the Guardian Angels. This report provides a comprehensive background on the organization and its past activities in the City of Detroit.

A. Overview of the Guardian Angels

Curtis Sliwa, who was then a night manager at a McDonald's in the South Bronx New York, founded the Guardian Angels in 1979¹. The original Guardian Angels consisted of thirteen (13) members (all employees of the same McDonald's franchise). The original movement has evolved into The Alliance of Guardian Angels, Inc.² a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization with Chapters worldwide³. The organization's programs have expanded from the safety patrols started 27 years ago to include:

- Professional Development for Educators. Sessions for teachers on topics that include: diversity & cultural awareness, school violence prevention, classroom management techniques, and recognition of gang involvement.
- School Safety⁴. The Guardian Angels Role Model Academy encourages non-violent cooperation between students by providing anti-bullying and peer conflict resolution training for students. In partnership with New York Public Schools, the YMCA and the New York Housing Authority, the Junior Angels⁵ was formed in 1994. This program includes anti-drug and gang education, violence prevention and character building. Junior Angels also participate in community projects that include feeding the homeless and community clean up. The organization also offers student assembly programs.

¹ Still the head of the Guardian Angels, Mr. Sliwa is also a morning talk radio host on WABC in New York.

² Mary Sliwa, wife of founder Curtis Sliwa, is the Executive Director of the organization.

³ For example, active Chapters exist in Canada, Italy, Japan, South Africa, New Zealand and the Philippines.

⁴ Certain Guardian Angels school safety programs are mandatory in both New York and New Jersey.

⁵ Also known as the Teen Angels.

- Internet Safety. The high tech program, Cyberangles, was founded in 1995. This program focuses on Internet-based criminal activities such as pedophilia and child pornography.

Expanding the organization's outreach has not changed its mission. The website indicates that its' goal is to "motivate individuals, and to create a safer future through our programs devoted to personal safety, civic contribution, value development and cyber security." Members still wear red berets, which make them easily identifiable and are required to complete mandatory training. For participation in community safety patrols, there is a three-month training session that includes 75-minute workouts followed by a 3-mile run. Members are not armed, but are trained in physical self-defense. The training places the most emphasis on avoiding physical confrontation and aiding police by providing descriptions of lawbreakers and providing first aid.

B. The Guardian Angels in Detroit

The Guardian Angels had active Chapters in Detroit beginning in the 1980s. Members patrolled housing projects and neighborhoods (such as Cass Corridor, Southwest and Northeast Detroit) as well as Hamtramck and Highland Park⁶. Historically, the Detroit Chapter had a high turnover rate of members and leadership, problems with maintaining local headquarters and lacked organizational staying power. The original Chapters ceased to operate. Most recently, a Detroit Chapter was formed in 2004.

When members of the New York Chapter of the Guardian Angels traveled to Detroit to patrol, Mayor Young and the Chief of Police William Hart were very vocal in their opposition to their presence in Detroit. The Mayor and Chief were opposed to the vigilante operations of the group, concerned about interference with police activities and hesitant that non-Detroiters would be involved in patrolling. Consequently, the Mayor and Chief maintained that the group was not welcome or needed in Detroit, and tension existed. The Police Chief and Board of Police Commissioners released a joint statement that "We have serious reservations about any group . . . particularly one organized by strangers to our city . . . taking to the streets in an attempt to enforce the law."

In March of 1982, Mr. Sliwa was arrested for trespassing when he and other members attempted to build a shanty in Hart Plaza. The purpose was to draw attention to the City's crime problem. He was sentenced to ten days in jail.

Mr. Sliwa and four other members were also arrested in 1984 for staging a "sit in" at the Book Cadillac Hotel lobby during a conference⁷ held by the Mayor. During this time Mr. Sliwa appeared before the Detroit City Council and was met with mixed reviews. Councilwoman Maryann Mahaffey stated the group "smelled of vigilantism" and Councilman John Peoples likened the group to a cult because of the emphasis it placed on Mr. Sliwa, its leader.

⁶ Highland Park Mayor Robert Blackwell met with Mr. Sliwa regarding the commencement of safety patrols in October of 1981.

⁷ The City was plagued by a series of forty-seven (47) rapes of girls going to or coming from school. The Mayor set forth the City's plan to address the issue and provide updates at a series of conferences.

Councilman David Eberhard defended the group indicating it would either fail or succeed on its own.

On April 7th of 1982, thirty-seven volunteers⁸ graduated from Guardian Angels training in Detroit. On April 8th, members of the Detroit Chapter began patrolling in the Cass Corridor and North Central Detroit. One month prior to their first patrols, Mr. Sliwa met with the Police Chief and established a framework for cooperation that did not include official recognition of the group, but that police would cooperate and respond when Guardian Angels reported crimes and that the police would not harass members of the organization while on patrol. The impact on crime was not calculable primarily because their presence was intended to deter criminal activity. The perception of safety and sense of security among residents was increased with the Guardian Angels patrolling. This perception allowed some residents to move more freely throughout their neighborhoods. At this time, the organization had 2,300 members nationwide and had active Michigan Chapters in Detroit and Kalamazoo.

In September of 1982, the first members of the New York contingent⁹ arrived in Detroit to supplement citizen patrols in Highland Park as well as the Jeffries and Brewster housing projects after 20 members from North Central Detroit quit the national group. The rationale for the additional New York members being sent was because the former Detroit members did not patrol as often as they promised they would.

In June 1984, as part of a crime prevention initiative on the east side, Mayor Young invited the Guardian Angels to join the police reserves at the Gratiot (15th) precinct, further maintaining his belief that the group should not be permitted to patrol on its own. As part of the same initiative, the Mayor proposed rehiring 126 laid off police officers¹⁰. The Mayor also expanded the Detroit Police Department's Junior Cadet program to include volunteer patrols by teenagers. In 1984, the Guardian Angels had fifty (50) Chapters nationwide, four (4) in Canada and 5,000 members.

A renewed Citywide mobilization against crime was again proposed by the Young Administration at a series of "community summits" on crime in 1985. In part, the Mayor encouraged increased citizen participation in voluntary patrols, expanded the Citizens Radio Patrols and added civilian police reserves. Members of the Guardian Angels were arrested for disorderly conduct at one of the summits for refusing to view from an overflow room and forcing their way past police officers.

Mayor Young was not the only critic of the group during the late 1970s and early 1980s, New York's Mayor Ed Koch was initially concerned about the vigilantism of the group and its operating procedures. After continued dialogue and efforts to work in tandem with the police, its reputation in New York as a vigilante organization diminished. The Police Commissioner of

⁸ The Guardian Angels received 188 applications of which 60 were chosen for membership and training. Thirty-seven of who "graduated" and became members.

⁹ Twenty-four New York members were expected; however four were arrested for hitchhiking in Pennsylvania and returned to New York after their release.

¹⁰ This rehiring was contingent upon the City not having to rehire more than 1,000 black officers as part of a judgment from a discrimination case.

Buffalo New York also opposed the opening of a national training academy in the city not because of dislike for the citizen patrols, but for dislike of Curtis and Lisa Sliwa.

Since many urban areas already espoused programs similar to the community patrols by volunteers advocated by the Guardian Angels, it seemed as though Mr. Sliwa himself is what city officials nationwide found so aggravating. In reference to Mayor Young, Sliwa stated in 1984 that “[t]he problem with Coleman Young is that he’s used to being the absolute boss all the time [and is] used to dealing with ultraliberals and academics who jump when he yells. Well, I don’t jump.” In 1985, Sliwa asserted, “the sight of the red beret (worn by Guardian Angels) to Mayor Young is like the sight of a red cape to the charging bull.” He also accused Mayor Young the same year of practicing segregation when it comes to the Guardian Angels. The foregoing quotes are indicative of the openly hostile verbal exchanges that occurred between local leaders and the founder of the Guardian Angels.